

1970 - A Tribute to Max Armstrong 1884-1970

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(. . .) denotes a break in the tape or encloses a reconstruction of the discourse - ed.

(Part 1) Chair: (YS leader Joe Young): This forum tonight marks the opening of a new series of Vanguard Forums in our new headquarters here at 334 Queen Street West... The meeting on Israel and the Middle-East (*a debate between Harry Kopyto and an invited pro-Israel speaker*) has been postponed (to make way for) the occasion of this meeting which is a memorial for Max Armstrong (. . .)

Ross Dowson: Comrades and friends: when I was listening to Joe's introductory comments, it came to mind the famous phrases of the great "Wobbly" (*member of the IWW, the early syndicalist, and first crusading industrial unionists in North America, the International Workers of the World-ed.*) poet Ralph Chaplin - I don't know if some of you know of him - I think one of the few with some poetic skill who wrote on working class themes. I'm not going to read the poem (. . .) the theme of one was - that we should not mourn the dead. And we're not here tonight to mourn the dead, to mourn Max Armstrong or to mourn Bertrand Russell, about whom I would like to say a few words.

We're here to as the chairman said, to commemorate, to remember them, to establish in our own minds the significance of their role and their contribution, and to learn what we can from their span on this earth, and insofar as they were part of us, to learn intimately what we can of the significance of their life - both of them, both Russell's and Max's - who spent some lengthy time with us, and I think there would be some words worth mentioning in regards to them.

These two men died last week. It is difficult for one to be maudlin about them, to be sentimental about them - after all they led very full lives, both of them - very lengthy lives, and if we can have any regrets about their deaths in the normal sense that people regret death, I don't think that we can say that we did not know them fully - that they did not give everything they had to us. I think they did - both of them did, they lived a full life. If we have any regrets we might say that it is indeed regrettable and a sad commentary on the society in which we live which has produced such profound knowledge about whole areas of life and death but hasn't solved the very simple problem of recuperating the human body which tends to run down. Both these men, one I think 97 and the other 86 were victims of the lack of scientific knowledge in this area.

Paying tribute to Bertrand Russell and Max Armstrong

But they lived very full lives and both of them are well known figures, particularly Max, to us here tonight. Bertrand Russell of course is a figure of international repute. He was a man born of an aristocratic family, he was educated in the best English schools and he always had great resources at his disposal. Insofar as anyone could say about a person who could live any way he wanted, one could say that Bertrand Russell had everything going for him. But he was a great iconoclast; and he was also a mathematician of considerable importance, although later on he considered this of secondary importance to himself, and he was a great liberal humanist, an agnostic. But I think he will be remembered by our generation, by those of us here tonight, and I think for the next oncoming period, for his initiation of the War Crimes Tribunal, an investigation of the crimes committed by American imperialism against the people of Vietnam. And of course as you know, even though he was in a period when most persons had withdrawn from active involvement, he

went further and initiated a whole series of actions and made so many plans and a great many pronouncements against imperialism, **against American imperialism**, and the fact that he did this in his later years it seems to me can't help but give us a warm feeling of identity with such a man, such a human being, and cause us not to forget him too easily, that he played the role that he did, in this period.

He entered into the fray in his later years and he carried on a magnificent struggle. Who of us can forget that magnificent portrait of him - I believe it is going to be carried in the next issue on the front page of **The Vanguard** - it was first published at the time when Russell was opposing nuclear arms bases on British soil, and he went down to Downing Street and I believe he protested against the British Labour Party government, and there is a picture of him snapped at a moment of outraged indignation, against the crimes of imperialism and the crime of the party of which he had been a life-long member.

And that picture - and Bertrand Russell I think will always be, for us, who are acquainted with that picture - a symbol of man's unconquerable spirit, his unconquerable determination to stand up for justice, and an expression of his will and determination.

Last year when the first installments of his autobiography appeared, the press commented extravagantly on the interesting aspect of these autobiographies - these two volumes - but they contrasted them most unfavourably to his later years. They suggested that the Bertrand Russell whom we know and whom we are inspired by, is somewhat senile, perhaps, or had fallen under evil influences of such persons as Ralph Schoenman. But this was his **finest** hour, his last years, in his 90s; that were his great years, and that was when his life, I feel confident we can say, reached his highest meaning for mankind for today, and for future generations.

Max, an immigrant who became a revolutionary in Canada

And now I would like to say a few words about the other man who died last week, exactly one week ago, Max Armstrong. He died last Friday night at the age of 86 years. He, like Russell, was a man of great dignity, and great pride. At the funeral, one of the young persons who knew him, who didn't really appreciate his ideas and his contributions, commented on this aspect of Max. The way he walked, the way he presented himself; his appearance, his manner: he was a man of pride in his manner. He was an iconoclast all right, but he was more than an iconoclast; he was a **revolutionary**, a socialist. His life, unlike Russell's, who I believe from reading a few synopses of his biography, at some times despaired at the meaning of his life, at various times, while Max's life was full of meaning and was a harmonious whole.

Max was a worker by birth, born of the working class; but he was also a worker - a proletarian I should say - by choice. He came to Canada at the age of 23 years, at the turn of the century. And as you know Canadian capitalist society was still in a period of considerable expansion, and many immigrants who came to Canada at that time, cut the cloth and adapted and conformed, and some of them, a few, made something of themselves as the bourgeois term is used; they acquired a few possessions, a home, a business, and became part of the established workings of the system; because as I say when Max came to America, America was still a going concern, a going operation. But Max, as I say, was a proletarian by choice - by choice. Shortly after his arrival he became a unionist - as I recall he was a (---maker? *inaudible*), a rather archaic skill, now in our eyes in America, and I gather some kind of machinist, having some technical capacity with machinery.

So he became a unionist when he arrived in Canada; he was a "made in Canada" socialist. You know the old saying of the bourgeoisie that socialists are foreign imports, brought here by malcontents and radicals. When Max came to America, I don't know what he anticipated in America, but he wasn't a socialist. I am not sure whether he had any concept of socialism when he came to America, but he became a socialist on the basis of his experience in this country.

(Deteriorating quality tape at this point -ed.) (. . .) once he found himself, he became a socialist (. . .) He didn't devote all his time to the revolution; certainly he devoted as much time as he could; first he had to make a living. But once he made that decision, he never turned back; he never, ever turned back. (. . .) You can say he lived fully in the present, and I can remember many anecdotes that showed his zest, and his vital feeling for life, but he really lived for the future, that's what Max lived for.

He never wrote a biography. Like many revolutionaries he didn't have time and perhaps he didn't fully appreciate the significance of his own life and his own role, for anyone else. As a matter of fact Max never talked about his personal life; and as I came to jot down some ideas about him I realize now that there are whole phases of his life (that I did not know - *tape static here -ed*).

(. . .) but he gave himself fully to the socialist movement; that's how he saw himself, and that's how he presented himself to other workers, as a socialist first and foremost. Socialism gave **him** a fuller life, gave him the possibility to achieve his own life in a broader perspective in the framework of the Canadian socialist revolution. And that's possibly why he never ever told us anything (about himself, the small things♦) And if we were to ask of Max "what did you do with your life?" - the question that confronts everybody, at various times in their life - Max answered very clearly (. . .) In 1912, he joined the struggle to build the revolutionary vanguard party.

That's very early revolutionary socialist politics in this country. He remained as I say true to that concept, all the entire span of his life. He left nothing: I happened to be one of his executors - of material goods, he acquired nothing - he wasn't concerned about (such matters). He lived a full life (...) he lived what for him had meaning - he dedicated his life to the revolution, and to the movement.

Max a Marxist, but also a lifelong member of the CCF

I'd like to say a few words about this man. You know, the League for Socialist Action, which Max was a member of, in the biographical sketch which I sent to the (daily) papers on which those reports are to some degree based, in that sketch, I mentioned that Max was an honorary member, a lifetime member of the CCF and the New Democratic Party. But I also asked it be noted that as a Marxist socialist, he was a member of the League for Socialist Action. The LSA, as you probably know from reading our press, and attending our forums, has claimed to be the direct lineal descendent of the revolutionary formations which had developed earlier (in Canada.) We consider our movement, the League for Socialist Action/Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière♦, as part of an unbroken continuity that commenced with the formation of the Communist Party of Canada, the very important (starting) point, in the year 1921. That's been our claim; that's what our movement is. If someone asked us where we had come from; where we began, we said well of course we are part of the whole ongoing struggle of a popular (movement) which has been taking place since the prehistory and written history (of the socialist movement); this is part of our heritage - but really we got underway, the LSA got underway, with the foundation of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) in 1921.

But you see our movement is not a new movement, although if you look around you; you see very many young people, extremely young people... What gives it its youth of course is the crisis of capitalism, which has developed in scope, in Canada in recent years, and the responses of new generations to this crisis of capitalism. There has been of course a big gap, a big gap in generations, you might say - you know the bourgeois press often talks about the "generation gap" when it talks about the ongoing (rise) of the youth and the older generation. Well they could also say, I suppose, there's a generation gap in the forces of the revolution; but not in the spirit of the forces of the revolution - there is a continuity - and that **spirit** is embodied in the League for Socialist Action.

There's been a couple of generation gaps in the revolutionary vanguard. Many of the forces that came together in 1921, with Max, in a period of catastrophic developments, were exhausted and destroyed, and the next generation after them destroyed, and there was the wave of McCarthyism - this also exhausted and used up another generation - and it is only now that the League for Socialist Action, you might say the revolutionary spirit of the League, has come into action on its own.

But the growth of our movement, the viable element, to a large degree, has been able to maintain the continuity (...*tape recording breakdown -ed*.) ...where are we going? The survival of the forces that launched the struggle with the foundation of the CPC in 1921 has been to a large degree not only due to the firm foundations that were laid at that time, but upon the perseverance, at various occasions (enable us to say) that this movement that exists here tonight, that is going to rally its forces together in convention probably here in this hall, probably this next Fall - this movement actually got under way following the First World War, and under the inspiration of the Russian Revolution, and from the leadership and program that was tested and came out of that event, from which it was fortified.

Max a living link with the socialist "prehistory" of Canada

We claim that continuity - we claim it several ways. On some occasions we've gone through the list of the founding executive members of the Communist Party in 1921, and insofar as we have been able to trace them, we can say that all but Tim Buck became Trotskyists - all of them. Maurice Spector, as the chairman mentioned, was the first Trotskyist in North America; the man who launched the struggle against the Stalinization of the Communist International and later the Communist Party of Canada, and who was later joined by the chief organizer of the CPC, Jack MacDonald, by a matter of a couple of years, and later joined, on another continent, by Jack Kavanaugh, one of the founders of the CP whom I was pleased to read some years ago, was the first candidate that our Australian movement ever ran in federal elections, a Canadian pioneer of the Communist Party of Canada and a leader of the Vancouver General Strike; and then there was Malcolm Bruce, the editor of **The Worker** (*the journal of the CPC -ed.*) for many years and who joined our movement after World War 2, and of course Max Armstrong.

Max was, you might say, he was the living link between that generation that founded the Communist Party of Canada, who initiated the struggle in this continent, with the forces that is carrying it on. That's what Max was, the living link. He was the last living representative of that generation, to the new generation. Unlike Jack MacDonald, who came to Canada in 1930s, and who already by 1910 been a socialist and a leading unionist in Scotland, president of the patternmakers (union) in Scotland; Max became a socialist and unionist in this country. He came from Glasgow; he was 23 years of age (. . .) how did he come to socialism?

(*Much broken sound throughout on tape -ed.*) ...how did he come to socialism? Well, he told us once (*broken sound ... because there were some socialists in Canada then*) and one of them was Paddy Stanton (. . .) Max was a big talker, an agitator; Paddy sat him down (to talk to him). Max came through the revolutionary socialist press; that's how he came to socialism; he came through a paper called **Cotton's Weekly**, at one time a very extensive publication. Max talked about how that paper exhausted itself by its success. Apparently it had got so many subscribers that the paper couldn't meet the postal costs (*general laughter from the audience*). It sounds like a little tall story, but any rate, that's how Max came into contact with socialist ideas, through **Cotton's Weekly**. Shaw - Bernard Shaw - once said, that Marx made a man of him; well we can certainly say that Marx certainly made Max Armstrong. That's what shaped Max's entire life.

Max learned very well, very profoundly, the basic concepts developed by Karl Marx. Max was a materialist, a very thoroughgoing materialist. He was a practitioner of the dialectic -- the signs of the general laws of motion. He grasped Marx's economic doctrines, in which Marx revealed the economic laws of motion of capitalist society: "The Labor Theory of Value," "The Nature of Surplus Value." Above all, Max was very well acquainted with and grounded in the theory of class struggle. In later years when we got to know Max, we couldn't help but be impressed by his insatiable interest in history. I never met a man who was so interested, so cognizant, so vitally concerned in history, and not just current history; Max read all history. And that's not limited to Medieval history, but prehistory. Max had a great sense of history. Perhaps some of us younger people, involved in the ongoing process and the problems that confront the movement in the day-to-day, felt that Max wasn't quite with it, in our own impatience (. . .) perhaps those of us who felt that didn't realize the profound importance of what I think Max was saying about the long (perspective) of history (. . .) which proved of inestimable value, carrying back through all the history of human struggles - Max spanned a great period of (the study of history...); Max had that understanding of the long period of history that gave him a sense of proportion, that gave him a commitment in the struggles to maintain himself, for the struggle for a socialist society. (*Badly broken sound follows...*) These views are simple once you become acquainted (with them...) - very simple. But they are views which are most contentious and reflect (the concerns of) every generation - of the new men and women (who come to the movement.)

Max rejected reformism. (...) He was for a socialist revolution. He understood that there had to be a profound overturn of all existing (conditions). He rejected syndicalism (...) he knew that simple unionism, no matter how militant, no matter how heroic, would never settle accounts with the ruling classes. He rejected parliamentarism, (but) he was for parliamentary action - one of the key notes sounded by Max in all of the speeches and contributions he made was a forthright rejection of parliamentarism. He knew the need for a revolutionary vanguard party, a party that was based on class struggle concepts (...) Max found those basic ideas (...) he assimilated them very thoroughly; from then on, Max swam with the broad movement of the class (...) he never lost his feeling for the broad movement of the class (...)

Max in his opposition to World War 1 stood with Lenin, Trotsky and Debs

(Noisy tape and broken sound) At the same time when he was out of touch with the revolutionary vanguard forces, which he was for a while, he always kept with the best elements (. . .) he always kept with the class. (He helped organize) the Social-Democratic Party of Canada; he helped organize the first vanguard type of party in this country (. . .) When he lost contact, he went to Montreal and helped form the Montreal Labor Party (. . .) he joined the CCF and the NDP. Max never cut the cloth to become integrated or become assimilated into those organizations. Max moved into them as part of the ongoing class struggle (. . .) The Montreal Labor Party was one of the early attempts to build a broad-based class organization. It became a component part of the CCF (. . .) But with the revival of the revolutionary vanguard forces, Max joined them (. . .)

(Broken sound) Max was a big man. (. . .) Max was a powerful orator; he spoke convincingly, with great energy, purpose - perhaps some of us (didn't appreciate him fully). Max opposed World War 1; and of course as you know WW 1 is now established as an imperialist war; but it wasn't in Max's time (. . .) he was an activist in the Social-Democratic Party, at that time. As a matter of fact, the Socialist Party, the Social-Democratic Party - all these formations in Canada underwent a profound crisis and almost the entire leadership of them defected like the social-democrats did across the rest of the world. Max was at that time 32 years of age - a mature man - and he spoke out against the war on street-corners. And you must say, then, that Max stands with (the greatest revolutionaries of the time), with Lenin, with Trotsky, on this question, in moral stature, and in courage. He stands with Debs, because it's a fact that this movement in Canada, the socialist movement in Canada, was shattered by World War 1, just as the social-democratic parties across the rest of Europe were. If you think Lenin and Trotsky were men of stature who stood up (*in opposition to the war*), they at least had a powerful party behind them, a party that remained intransigent and more or less homogenous in its opposition to the World War. But the party of which Max was a part, and in which he was an activist, was shattered; and Max continued to struggle himself, along with the scattering (elements) who opposed (the war.)

Max prepared for what would come out of this. (...a very difficult time.) After a period of opposition, the revolutionary socialists were completely inundated in this country, and they were incapable of carrying any real action. What they did, they lived for the next move, the next development, and (they waited). They were convinced that out of that war would come the revolution (. . .) (They maintained) the dream that they had of a socialist society... (*extensive broken sound*) Max, with the best of his class - they became very quickly (members of) the Third International of Lenin and Trotsky (members of a) vanguard party, a democratic-centralist type of party, a combat party that synthesizes theory and action.

Already by 1920, a few years after the war, Max Armstrong (and a few others) whose memories should be revived: Florence Custance, Maurice Spector and Max had organized what became to be known as the Ontario Labour College... a strange name, because it's really just a front, because as you know, following the general strike, the left wing was illegalized in Canada, so they called themselves the Ontario Labour College. (. . .) they rejected the Socialist Party of Canada, rejected the Independent Labor Party and they rejected the OBU (*One Big Union, syndicalists -ed.*) - they rejected all the other socialist currents in this country (. . .) and they made connections with the United (*sound broken*)... At that time the Ontario Labor College was holding classes in Toronto and holding them in Hamilton (. . .) in a time of sometimes an unrewarding process of pulling together cadre.

Max fought with the first Canadian Communists for legality

In 1921, on October 15th, the first revolutionary socialist paper appeared in this country - **The Workers Guard**. It issued a very simple statement - I might just quote it: **The Workers' World** - that was what it was called in its second edition - they had some trouble with names, apparently; at any rate, they called themselves **The Workers' World** with the second issue of their paper, they said they were "convinced that the only government which can realize a real program of change from capitalism to a system where the workers own and control, is a soviet government." Very simple, very clear, but very concentrated (...), very profound; that was the aim (. . .) (This was the action of) the Ontario Labour College, launched by Maurice Spector, Max and (. . .) They held classes in Hamilton (. . .) and they made connections with other forces, in Toronto called The Workers' Educational Club, a leading activist of which was Jack MacDonald; and they went about the process of trying to unify the revolutionary forces, in Toronto. That was the (extent of) forces around (Florence) Custance, Max Armstrong, and the forces around Jack MacDonald.

In the first issue of **Workers' Guard**, they carried a report of a meeting, which was addressed by among others, Jack MacDonald, by Max Armstrong, William Moriarty, and a Mrs. Knight, who was also a very important activist in the communist movement in this country. I don't know her first name; women were always known by their title Mrs., and Miss. At any rate, this meeting was a meeting on the unemployed situation which was quite a greivous one, right across the country. Soldiers were coming back from participating in imperialist slaughter which ended in 1917, and the war industries were fading out, and there was unemployment across the country. (. . .) And so the report was extensive. I read through it; it said at one point in the article that "Max Armstrong was in his usual form, imperturbable and convincing..." That was what Max was (*inaudible section of tape...*)

In 1921, October 15, this is what Max had to say: "The capitalists have time and time again told us that (while) labor was going for power, (but) that **their** brains and direction ability was the main factor in production. This, we as the working class absolutely deny, but we will call their bluff and say: 'Gentlemen, (since) you claim the brains and direction ability; organize production and give us worker compensation...' (*general laughter*) "Continue," he said, "there is only one kind of power, but unfortunately the masters have got it. The Social-Democrats in Germany captured seats, but the capitalists retained the guns. The workers will never gain anything until they take the very foundations of society." A demonstration of ten thousand workers in this park, Queen's Park, will bring out a regiment of soldiers with field guns, but the demonstration will have vastly more effect with the power of its orators, than your guns." That's Max, the orator; I don't know what else he said, but (*that was what was reported...*)

Max as organizer and educational speaker in Toronto and Montreal

In the next issue they announced a special (project...) Max, a leader of the Ontario Labour College, went to Montreal. There he participated in the foundation of the Montreal Labour College, and in leading some classes. There was about seven of them, and they charged 75 cents to get into the class (... Some of the subjects were...) "Internal factors and social evolution, inorganic and organic;" that was the first class, (then) "Man: physical, emotional and intellectual." The next class: "Primitive ideas and their action on national progress;" next one: "Property, War and the antique state." The next one: "Western Civilization after the breakup of the Roman Empire" (*howls of laughter from audience*), and the last one: "The Rise of the great modern State and Machine production." So, in this way Max spanned the course of history (*laughter*). But they were very interesting classes, and very, very relevant, make no mistake about it.

As a matter of fact, there is a very interesting article written by a Doris White, a report of these classes. And she says "Max's course of lectures on factors of social evolution were a tremendous success" --that's in the next issue. "The hall was crowded every night, and by the questions and discussion one could not help but realize that these young eager students had a lot" (to think about...) The last lecture in this series gave Comrade Armstrong a chance to inspire his audience with a real fighting spirit: he said that "it is not enough for us to say that the revolution is inevitable, and to sit back and wait for it to happen." He showed where "it is necessary for us to put up a scrap. While this system lasts we have nothing to hope for but misery, degradation and unemployment. When the workers of the class understand things as they really are, they will join the militant army of the working class."

The classes as I said were very important. As a matter of fact that process was the most important (in assembling) the vanguard forces (...) They were most important, in Canada, up until that time. The December 17, 1921 issue reported on the December 11 conference in Toronto. That conference was attended by 61 (?) delegates (. . .) they founded the ... party, the first Marxist party♦ (*inaudible tape*) ♦ Jack MacDonald was the national reporter. Out of that conference the final call went for the formation of the Workers' Party (. . .) and Max was honoured with a membership. Max was now 38 years of age (. . .) (I suppose he was already the grand old man♦ Maurice Spector was probably about 19 at that time.

(*tape inaudible*) According to the obituaries in the press♦ Max dropped away. I don't know what was involved; he tried to explain it to me once; he tried to relate it to the evolution of the Communist Party, with the struggles of Maurice Spector conducted against the Stalinization of the party, but... (*tape inaudible, involving Jack MacDonald and the party*) ...he tried to relate it, but my impression was (*inaudible*) ...it is said that he had an uneasy feeling in the party, very early after it was organized... (Max said that) the party wasn't an independent party, a party that had developed a capacity to develop its own views, it's own ideology; and very quickly he said he sensed the intervention of what we would call "the Soviet bureaucracy." But it may have been something personal, because I would gather that at that time Max got married, probably about that time, and he had his family.

After a hiatus, Max returns "to smell the aroma of revolution"

(tape inaudible) But Max never lost (the faith)... Subsequently he joined the CCF... and then he found his way back into (our movement). He came into the forums we were holding very regularly... I wasn't acquainted (with him)... I got talking to him... Max never talked about his personal life, as a matter of fact (it was only later that I learned of his role) - he was always a very modest person (personally), but I understood that at that time he didn't appreciate his role in the founding of the Communist Party of Canada - but he came to that appreciation (later), despite his subsequent degeneration. We gave him that feeling of the importance (of his role), of the great consequences of his actions, and gave him an appreciation of himself (. . .) and he found his way back (to the movement),

He never fully lost (this perspective); he had that concept of being with the class *(tape inaudible)* ...he came again to understand the whole role (he played)... we of course were proud to (welcome Max back into the movement); very proud that he ended up as, passed on as a member at our side. We're happy that he identified fully with us. And now Max has left us - with no regrets; he gave all that he had, well not quite though, that is a simple fact, an emotion reaction. That's how Max was... Max loved youth; he wanted to be back with us. He made one real mistake in all his life: that was when he left us; he wanted to come back with us to smell the aroma of the revolution - those were his exact words: "to smell again the aroma of the revolution."

And so tonight we dip our banner in tribute to this fallen comrade. We raise it very quickly without regret in the spirit of going on, to go forward; inspired and gratified to know him as he was, confident, as he was, confident in the victory of the socialist revolution. *(applause)*

(Chairman's announcements of upcoming movement events followed. Dowson's replies to questions over the next 13 minutes largely inaudible, as were the contributions & questions.)*

(*Some broken remarks by RD on Max's relations with Toronto Mayor William Dennison and with Jimmy Simpson; also Max's role in expelling Simpson from the Socialist Party.)